QUESTIONABLE BLESSING

February 28, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 8:31-38
Genesis 17:1-9

"And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant,..."
-Genesis 17:7 (RSV)

It was Voltaire who said that if there were no God we would have to invent him. My guess is that everyone of us, at one time or another, has entertained the notion that God is a human invention; an illusion, a product of our own fears, insecurities and needs. And, we are essentially alone in the universe, on stage for a brief hour and then gone forever.

This is a sermon about the basic human quandary - Is there anyone there? In John Updiike's short story Trust Me, a little boy is urged by his father to jump into the swimming pool, into his father's arms. When he does his father pulls his arms away and the little boy sinks. When we jump -- will there be arms to catch us?

It is true that the Bible nowhere presents an academic argument for the existence of God. No one, I imagine, in the Sixth Century B.C., when the oldest stories in the Bible were collected and written, doubted that the world was literally filled with supernatural forces.

What those forces were... what God is like... what God has to do with human life - is very much the issue, however. Those questions were very much the issue, because in the Sixth Century the Hebrew people were in a very tight spot.

They were exiles in Babylon. Their army had been defeated. Jerusalem had been leveled and they had been herded across the desert and resettled in Babylon. It was the most traumatic thing that ever happened to them. And in Babylon they had a lot of questions:

What happened to God?
How come we're here and not in the holy land?
If we're chosen people, why aren't we a little more successful?

The answer to those questions is the Book of Genesis, particularly the story of Abraham and Sarah and the peculiar arrangement God has with them... It is called a covenant. Abraham and Sarah will have descendants - lots of descendants. They will have a land. And, enigmatically, they will have a God. They are covenant people. God's chosen people.

Joseph Heller has written an irreverent novel, God Knows, in which an old and very human King David is looking back over his life. Ever since the child Bathsheba bore died in infancy, David has carried on a kind of running argument with God. Reflecting on what it means to be God's covenant people, David complains -

"Some promised land. The honey was there, but the milk we brought in with our goats. To people in California, God gives a magnificent coastline, a movie industry and Beverly Hills. To us He gives sand. To Cannes He gives a plush film festival. We get the PLO. Our winters are rainy. Our summers are hot. To people who don't know how to wind a wristwatch He gives underground oceans of oil. To us He gives hernia, (heart-burn), and anti-Semitism.

"Don't ever get the idea He made things easy for me. Life as one of God's chosen people has never been a bed of roses."

From the beginning, being part of God's chosen people has seemed as much of a burden as a privilege. Getting involved with God has been at least a questionable blessing. "Why, if we are so special, are we being defeated in battle, enslaved in Egypt, exiled in Babylon, occupied by the Romans, driven from our land, chased, hounded and persecuted down through the centuries, crowded into ghettos, blamed for everything that goes wrong, pushed into concentration camps and gas chambers by the self-proclaimed savior of Christian culture, the brunt of vicious ethnic jokes acceptable at every polite cocktail party, and still - unwelcome in the most exclusive clubs in town.

Now, let's be clear about the record, even if it is painful. Part of the burden of the covenant has been anti-Semitism. Painful as it is to acknowledge, there has been no anti-Semitism as virulent as Christian anti-Semitism. The relationship between Christians and Jews has been difficult from the start. In the First Century of the common era, the early Church and the Synagogue were often openly hostile to each other, and sometimes violent. By the Third Century the Christian Church was teaching something called "supersessionism," which meant that because the Jews had not accepted Jesus as Messiah, God had rejected them and replaced them by the Christian Church.

It is only after nearly 1,700 years that the Christian Church is searching its own soul and attempting to set the record straight. The Vatican and most major Protestant denominations have prepared statements in recent years on the topic. Our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly approved for study last year a document entitled, "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews." It is very interesting, challenging, controversial and, I believe, altogether healthy. It says, for instance: that Jews and Christians believe in and worship one

God; we are engrafted into Israel; the Covenant between God and Israel continues; while we are called as Christians, to witness to the truth we have discovered in Jesus Christ, so Judaism continues to be called to be a light to the world; and that there is simply no room in our faith for the traditional contempt for the Jews which has characterized Christian culture for many centuries.

The topic is timely. Israel is in the news daily, in a way that makes those who care about justice in the world most uncomfortable.

The Presbyterian statement suggests that the covenant with God is seriously violated when Israel betrays its best values. That is, God's promise of land stops far short of what has transpired in the Near East with a whole generation of Palestinian people dislocated, disenfranchised, without rights or dignity or a future. And, with the armies of Israel, beating and breaking bones in order to silence their cries.

But theologically, our church and others said the first new thing anyone has said for centuries. And it is about time. It is time for dialogue, for solidarity, for joining hands with Judaism to witness to God's love for the world. It is time for Christian people to feel in their own souls the pain of anti-Semitism, to understand that we are children of the covenant, that Abraham and Sarah are our parents. It is time to acknowledge that the Holocaust was only possible because the Christian Church had excused, and often sponsored, anti-Semitism for centuries.

In the Art Institute there is a painting by Marc Chagall that I visit every several months. It is called White Crucifixion. It was painted in 1938, as the full demonic intent of Nazism became clear. There is a rabbi in the picture and various portrayals of Jews being persecuted. At the center is Jesus on a cross, with a Jewish garment around his mid-section. It is a powerful painting. I have noticed almost every time I am there, looking at it with me, are elderly Eastern European Jews. They know about the Chagall in Chicago. They know what it means.

The Bible addresses the question of God by telling about a covenant - a promise.

Old Abraham and Sarah are going to have an heir, a prospect so unlikely Sarah laughed out loud when she heard it. They will also have land, an equally improbable prospect for an old couple with a tent and several goats to their name. And most mysterious and tantalizing and enigmatic of all - they will have a God.

"I will establish my covenant between me and you... to be God to you and to your descendants."

What does that mean? What does it mean to have one who will be God to you? In a world where having a god meant success at war or agriculture or commerce, all Israel gets is an enigma. It's a questionable blessing. But it is astonishingly contemporary.

For one thing the old pagan idea that there are tangible rewards for being religious is still very much alive. There was a time not long ago in

this country, that economic success was regarded as the natural result of godliness. And there is enormous appeal to a religion which promises rewards for people who don't have many rewards, at least emotional rewards; for people who don't otherwise feel very good about themselves, or at the very least, a vicarious reward of knowing that the evangelist is getting something of what the rest of us deserve. Before the debacle, Jim Bakker said about PTL's world-class luxury hotel, "We're using better bait to win people to Jesus Christ."

The story of the covenant is a kind of warning against regarding religion as an investment in the future. Success may happen to us. But to expect religion to produce it not only trivializes faith, it flies in the face of one of our oldest beliefs.

At an even deeper level, every person who ever lived has asked about the relationship of faith to suffering. If God loves us, has chosen us, why are we in exile in Babylon? Why premature death, why birth defects and famine? Some theologians conclude that God must be dead in a world that knows so much injustice and undeserved suffering. "A God who tolerates the suffering of even one innocent child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent," Richard Rubenstein wrote in a powerful essay, After Auschwitz.

What the covenant means is not that God's people will be spared suffering. Not at all. In fact God's people - beginning with God's son - seem somehow to be suffering on behalf of the rest of the world. What the covenant means to the covenant people, and through them to the whole world, is that there is a loving God who - in spite of the evil in history, the tragic mistakes along the way - is a dynamic part of the story. The covenant promise to us is that in spite of the suffering through which you and I may be called to walk - the exiles, the captivities, the sickness, the surgery, in dying and grieving (which is our humanness) - in the midst of it, is one who will be God to us. We will not be alone or forgotten.

What does it mean to have a God? For Abraham and Sarah it meant that some new and unlikely things were about to happen. Abraham got a new name; Sarah got pregnant; and suddenly this settled, old couple found themselves confronted with radical possibility... descendants, a future, a land! What they had to do to enter into this covenant with a loving God was let go of their old certainties. They had to start thinking like parents, for one thing, which isn't easy. This means thinking about the future, instead of the past, which is the comfortable habit they had fallen into. Instead of pleasant nostalgia - baby bottles, diapers and money for nursery school! And they had to move, to become pilgrim people, on the road instead of settled down. In order to trust this loving God they had to stop trusting some other things.

And that, finally, is the basic religious issue which presents itself to each one of us out of this text. Professor Hans Kung has written eloquently about that in each of his books. Kung understands that atheism is rarely the issue.

"We all have a personal God: a supreme value by which we regulate everything, to which we orientate ourselves, for which if need be we

sacrifice everything. And if this is not the true God, then it is some kind of idol, an old or a new one - money career, sex, or pleasure - none of them evil things in themselves, but enslaving for those for whom they become God. Orientation to the one true God, to the sole Absolute, liberates us from all these things and permits us to use them, to express ourselves as human beings with them. Orientation toward the one true God thus makes a human being truly free in this world." [Why I Am Still a Christian, p. 47]

That's the essence of the Gospel. It is the theological common ground between Jews and Christians. Jesus was son of Abraham and Sarah, a child of the covenant, when one day he said, "If anyone would come after me, take up a cross and follow... whoever loses life for my sake will save it." That's precisely what Abraham and Sarah heard back on the edge of history. A voice calling them to radical trust and radical abandonment... A promise that, in that new faith, they would not be alone... They would become new and fully alive - and God would be God to them.

What does it mean to have a God? Well, it doesn't mean that you're guaranteed success in your endeavors... or health... or happiness... or long life. What it does mean is that you will have a partner, one who will be with you every day of your pilgrimage. What it means, we dare to believe, is that you have an answer to needs which are more profound than your need for health, happiness and success. We can only confess and tell how it has been for us.

To have one who is God to me means: I am known, there are no secrets... I am known thoroughly.

There is one who knows the dreams and hopes, pain, joy, doubt, I have not shared with anyone.

There is one who welcomes my honesty, who will never laugh at me or belittle me.

There is one who is personal... A Thou - in whose Thouness - my personhood, my "I-ness," has meaning.

There is one who creates beauty in the world and in the hearts of creatures who bear his image.

To borrow the philosopher Martin Heidegger's wise words - to have a God is to have one before whom - "pray and sacrifice, fall on (my) knees in awe, make music and dance." [Hans Kung, ibid, p. 47]

It means there is one who has expectations and hopes - an agenda. He keeps reminding me of that agenda - through my conscience (to which he seems to have easy access) - through my hopes and aspirations for myself, loved ones, nation and human race. And it means that the one who is God to me is an "eternal thou," not contingent, not dependent on me - my faith, my vocation, my morality. One who will exist after me. And one in whose heart I am always safe, never forgotten. To have a God means to be invited to trust - to stop trusting in anything else, and to put myself in loving, compassionate and strong hands.

Beyond anything we need, or think we need, we need one who will be God to us.

Near the end of Heller's book, David is approaching the end of his own life. The closest he ever comes to an affirmation of faith occurs in the middle of another argument. He says -

"A great nation God promised. To me he would not give the time of day. He made my baby die. How could I ever forget? I still have not forgiven Him for that, although I... need my God now more than ever before, and miss Him more than I would care to let Him know... I do not believe He has forgotten me." [p. 280]... "I want my God back" [p. 353]

And as he died, Jesus who said, "lose your life and save it," remembered the covenant. Remembered who he was and who God was and would always be and, therefore, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

It is the oldest article of our faith. It is the best news of all. We are children of the covenant. God will be God to us.

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Praise be to you, God eternal, for your mystery and power and infinite being.

Praise to you for calling us into being, breathing life into us, putting your image in us.

Praise to you, God eternal, for caring for us as your own, for coming to us, for calling us to faith, and for promising to be God to us.

Praise be to you, almighty God - Lord of all - through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.